

AT&T plans to 'aggressively' pursue FirstNet network

RCR Wireless News By Kelly Hill

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An AT&T executive said this week the carrier plans to aggressively pursue the chance to build out a nationwide LTE network for public safety users as the FirstNet project takes shape, while T-Mobile US took a more tempered view and Verizon Communications kept its cards close.

John Donovan, SEVP for technology and operations at AT&T, was asked about the carrier's perspective on FirstNet as part of the Citi 2016 Internet, Media & Telecommunications Conference in Las Vegas.

"It's a good opportunity for us and we're treating it as such," [Donovan said](#). "The timing of the spectrum, the position of the spectrum, the customer opportunity that comes with it – it's a rare event, so we're going to pursue it aggressively."

The federal government has allocated up to \$7 billion to build out a national network for first responders, which has been in the planning stages under the FirstNet board. The board [approved](#)

an official request for proposal for the network last month, which expected to be released in the coming weeks. For its fiscal 2016, FirstNet has an approved budget of \$126 million, the bulk of which will be focused on its RFP and spectrum relocation. FirstNet representatives

[have spoken](#)

about the opportunity for a national network partner to have access to sharing its 20 megahertz of 700 MHz spectrum in Band 14, making the case the spectrum will be available much sooner and less expensively than participating in federal auctions for sole spectrum ownership.

Although the FirstNet board did consider the possibility of regional networks, in its

[draft RFP](#)

earlier this year, FirstNet's goal for the network was described as a "single national architecture that evolves with technological advances and initially consists of a core and a radio access network."

Donovan also said spectrum from the upcoming broadcast incentive auction is unlikely to be cleared and available for use before 2020 or 2021. T-Mobile US representatives, however, said at the Citi conference they believe some portions of the spectrum will be cleared much more

quickly. Neville Ray, EVP and CTO of T-Mobile US, contrasted T-Mobile US’ enthused anticipation of the 600 MHz auction with a wait-and-see perspective on FirstNet.

“I think everybody’s kind of waiting to see the RFP’s out,” Ray said. “I’ve met with that (FirstNet) team multiple times now. I think they are very keen to try and engage with a wireless operator now, because they believe that trying to do this on their own or through third parties or whatever else just isn’t going to work. So there’s a lot of operator engagement coming from the FirstNet team.”

Ray went on to say that “the low-band spectrum is obviously meaningful, but ... you’ve got to share it with public safety, and you’ve got to meet public safety reliability requirements. There’s a lot of unknowns,” including how much dedicated time a carrier partner would have on that spectrum.

Although Ray said T-Mobile US is engaged and following the FirstNet process, he added “the auction is a much easier and clearer path to get to fresh, clean, virgin spectrum.”

Verizon, which some analysts have predicted is the most likely FirstNet partner, opted not to weigh in either way. Marni Walden, EVP and president of product innovation and new business at Verizon, was also asked about Verizon’s interest in FirstNet at the Citi conference. She [responded](#) “it is premature for us to comment.”

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